

## Reporting the ‘exodus’: News coverage of teacher shortage in Australian newspapers

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Many developed countries, including Australia, struggle to recruit and retain adequate numbers of schoolteachers. Over the past decade every Australian state has experienced teacher shortages and, at various times, there has been a national shortfall of qualified teaching staff. This paper considers the reporting of teacher shortage in four metropolitan daily Australian newspapers over a 10-year period. The focus of the analysis is on the newspapers’ portrayal of teachers throughout the coverage. The key themes identified were found to be consistent across the four publications. Teachers were frequently portrayed as leaving, or planning to leave, the profession due to dissatisfaction with pay, difficult students and/or excessive workloads. Furthermore, teachers were depicted as low achievers. Teachers’ voices were largely absent in the reporting, and the coverage rarely acknowledged the benefits and rewards of teaching as a career. The implications of these findings are discussed and recommendations for journalists and educators outlined.

### Introduction

News media coverage of educational issues is known to concern schoolteachers, who have expressed frustration at a perceived negative or biased focus in reporting (Brown, Ralph & Brember, 2002; Griffiths, Vidovich & Chapman, 2008; Hargreaves et al., 2007). In Australia, teachers have reported that news coverage regarding schools and teaching can shape public opinion and affect their relationships with friends, family and the wider community (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003). The impact of news coverage is such that some teachers have named misleading and negative reporting of educational issues as a factor in their decision to leave the profession (Fetherston & Lummis, 2012). Related research has found that teachers generally lack a voice in news media debates about education (Noguera, 2015; Shine & O’Donoghue, 2013; Thomas, 2006), and that teacher identity is most often constructed by “those talking about teachers, rather than teachers themselves” (Cohen, 2010, p. 107).

Despite an increasing body of evidence pointing to teacher concerns about news media coverage, few studies (Cohen, 2010; Hargreaves et al., 2007; Shine, 2015; Shine & O’Donoghue, 2013) have specifically considered how teachers and teaching are portrayed in the news. This paper aims to contribute to this under-researched area by examining the portrayal of teachers in the reporting of teacher shortage in *The West Australian*, *The Age*, *The Australian* and *The Courier-Mail* newspapers over a 10-year period, from 2004 to 2013. Coverage of teacher shortage is the focus of the study because teacher supply and demand has been one of the most important issues facing the Australian education system over the past decade. Also, teacher attrition has been the subject of significant and sustained news media coverage in Australia and internationally (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011), and is likely to continue to attract a high level of media attention as future shortages have been predicted.

According to a report published in *The Australian* in September 2012, which quoted then Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans, the nation will need an additional 46,000 teachers between 2016 and 2020 (Hare, 2012, p. 25).

## Background

In 1997, the Australian Council of Deans of Education released the first official report (Preston, 1997), to make projections about teacher supply and demand across the country. It concluded that Australia would experience a national shortfall of 7000 teachers by 2003. This prediction, which was the subject of significant news media attention at the time, was to prove accurate, and by 2004 *The Australian* newspaper was referring to a "national teacher shortage" (Balogh, 2004, p. 2). The situation over subsequent years varied from state to state. Western Australia experienced a severe shortfall between 2006 and 2008. Queensland had a statewide shortage of teachers in 2008 and 2009. For Victoria, the issue was most significant between 2008 and 2011. The severity of the staffing problem in those states was reflected in daily metropolitan newspaper coverage. *The West Australian* newspaper published 123 articles relating to teacher shortage between 2004 and 2013, and the Victorian daily broadsheet *The Age* published 64. As teacher shortage became an issue affecting numerous states it also attracted the attention of the national daily broadsheet *The Australian*, in which 46 articles were published, and, to a lesser extent, the Queensland-based *The Courier-Mail*, in which 16 articles were published during the time period considered.

The issue was the subject of intense coverage in *The West Australian* because that state experienced severe staffing shortages over several years. Reports of pending staffing problems started to emerge in 2004 and 2005 and shortages were experienced in 2006. By the start of the 2007 school year the state was dealing with a shortfall of 264 teachers across the government sector. This was reported as a matter of serious concern and it became a highly political issue over several years. The state government later set up a task force to identify solutions, and subsequently announced a pay rise for teachers and created a new 'executive' level for elite teachers. It also launched a campaign to attract teachers from overseas and interstate. The situation improved in 2008 and 2009, with the newspaper reporting in October 2009 that the state faced a potential oversupply of teachers in 2010 due to changes in school entrance ages. However, in 2010 it was reported that Western Australia would need an additional 3000 teachers within four years. Articles published in 2012 and 2013 continued to warn of further teacher shortages, but indicated the problem was confined to the secondary school sector.

Although *The Age* did not devote as much attention to teacher shortage as *The West Australian*, it covered the issue in detail over a prolonged period of time. Teacher supply was already a problem in Victoria in 2004 and the state government devised various strategies over 2004 and 2005 to try to attract teachers into difficult to staff schools. In 2006 *The Age* reported that there was a national teacher shortage and, in 2007, described a "young teacher exodus" (Hogan & Milburn, 2007, p. 20) from the profession. Teacher shortage continued to be in the news as public school teachers sought a pay increase from

the state government. A deal was struck in May 2008, with teachers winning pay rises of up to \$10,000 a year. The salary increase did not appear to improve the situation as *The Age* continued to describe acute and chronic staffing shortages throughout 2009, 2010 and 2011.

*The Australian* warned of a looming national shortage in 2004 and subsequently published numerous reports on the situations in Western Australia and Victoria. An article in 2010 predicted another nationwide shortage within a few years. The issue then intermittently received attention. The federal government warned of growing student numbers in 2012 while other reports from 2012-2013 described a severe shortage of maths and science teachers across the nation. The lack of maths and science teachers was also the subject of several articles in *The Courier-Mail* during the early part of the coverage considered. The situation in Queensland appeared to worsen within a few years as the newspaper reported in October 2008 that nine out of 10 public schools in the state did not have enough teachers. In November 2009 it was reported that Australia had a serious and growing teacher shortage problem. The newspaper continued to describe teacher shortages in 2010 and 2011, but at the same time pointed to a lack of job security for teaching graduates.

Around and during this period, as various state governments devised policies to recruit and retain teachers, there was much discussion at the federal level about the need to improve teacher quality and introduce accountability measures for teachers and schools (Dinham, 2013; Thomas, 2011). This began in 2003 under John Howard's Coalition government when the National Council of Ministers of Education commissioned a review that led to the development of the National Framework for Professional Standards of Teaching in November 2003. A focus on teacher quality continued after Kevin Rudd's Labor government was elected in 2007. The following year the states agreed to a five-year National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality that led to the publication of the National Professional Standards for Teachers in February 2011. Under Labor, the states also agreed to introduce national literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) tests for school students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 from 2008. As a further accountability measure the federal government, then led by Julia Gillard, made the NAPLAN results for each school publicly available via its *MySchool* website from 2010 (Shine & O'Donoghue, 2013). Numerous researchers have argued that such accountability measures, combined with the focus on improving teacher quality, have put teachers under increased pressure, intensified their role and affected their morale and enthusiasm for their work (Ball, 2010; Day, 2012; Dinham 2013; Lingard, 2010). Furthermore, news media coverage of these various government policies has been said to exacerbate the situation for teachers (Hattam, Prosser & Brady, 2009; Shine, 2015; Thomas, 2011).

## The study

This paper considers coverage of teacher shortage published in *The West Australian*, *The Age*, *The Australian* and *The Courier-Mail* from 2004 to 2013 inclusive. It begins in 2004 as that year marked the beginning of a sustained focus in coverage, in the four newspapers considered, on teacher shortage. The analysis concludes at the end of 2013 at a time when

most states were no longer experiencing widespread teacher shortages and news coverage of the issue had waned.

The four newspapers were chosen because they represent a cross-section of the Australian print news sector. The Fairfax-owned Victorian newspaper *The Age* has a strong tradition as a broadsheet publication (although it was changed to a "compact" format towards the end of the time period considered in this study, in March 2013). The Queensland-based *The Courier-Mail*, owned by News Ltd, was a broadsheet but switched to a "compact", tabloid-style format in 2006. The broadsheet *The Australian* is also part of the News Ltd stable but provides a unique national perspective, while *The West Australian*, owned by Seven West Media, is considered a tabloid/broadsheet hybrid. These four publications were found to have published the highest number of articles about teacher shortage among the Australian mainstream metropolitan daily newspapers during the time period considered. This was ascertained by searching for articles about teacher shortage on the *Factiva* international news database (<http://www.factiva.com>) produced by the Dow Jones media company. The focus of this research is on print publications because, in Australia, newspapers have been recognised as the primary source of education news (Snyder, 2008; Thomas, 2006). Most mainstream metropolitan newspapers have dedicated education reporters and news about education is published on an almost daily basis. Furthermore, research indicates that newspapers continue to set the news agenda for radio, television and online media outlets (McCombs, Holbert, Kioussis & Wanta, 2011; Pew Research Centre, 2010). It is worth noting that many of the articles from the latter part of the coverage would have also been published on the newspapers' websites.

The articles analysed were drawn from a *Factiva* database search for phrases including 'teacher shortage', 'teacher supply' and 'shortage of teachers' from 1 January 2004 to 31 December 2013. In total, 249 articles were identified, with the highest number appearing in *The West Australian* (123), followed by *The Age* (64), *The Australian* (46) and *The Courier-Mail* (16). Many of the articles were published between 2006 and 2008, when teacher shortages were generally most acute. The situation appeared to ease in Queensland and Western Australia in 2010 and 2011. From 2012 much of the focus of reporting across the newspapers turned to projections of future staffing shortfalls.

To examine the newspapers' portrayal of teachers in the coverage of teacher shortage, a grounded theory approach to analysis was used. Introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory involves the use of a systematic set of procedures to code data into categories to identify patterns (Weerakkody, 2009). This process allows for the development of inductively derived theory. The coding process involved first reading the collection of teacher shortage articles from each newspaper in its entirety several times. The articles were then examined line-by-line to "define the actions and events" (Charmaz, 2003) within them. The intention was to "interact with and pose questions to the data," as described by Charmaz (2003, p. 258) while at the same time making constant comparisons (Dey, 2004). Building on this process, various patterns and themes were identified, as was change over time. Memos, the "running logs of analytic thinking" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 108), were also used to

explore key concepts and categories emerging from the data, which in turn led to the development of propositions about the newspapers' portrayals of teachers.

As the study was conducted within the interpretivist paradigm it should be evaluated in terms of 'trustworthiness', as opposed to the more positivist criteria of validity and reliability. The components of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Credibility is enhanced when strategies are put into place that check on the inquiry process and allow for the direct testing of findings and interpretations from the original sources (Merriam, 2009). To this end, the reader can consult the newspaper accounts. Transferability to other contexts (within Australia) has been addressed with the inclusion of publications based in three Australian states. And finally, the development of an 'audit trail' is an accepted strategy for ensuring both dependability and confirmability (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 38). In this regard, the author has kept detailed records of the analysis.

## Analysis

The focus of the reporting varied between the publications. For example, *The West Australian* frequently reported on teachers' working conditions, emphasising high workloads, stress and difficult and abusive students. The issues of teacher pay and job security were particularly prominent in the coverage from *The Age* and *The Courier-Mail*. Pay and conditions also warranted attention in *The Australian* but that paper was distinctive in its emphasis on teacher quality from 2008 onwards. Teacher industrial action was also the subject of a high number of articles in *The West Australian* and *The Age*. Despite the differences between the publications, certain themes were identified as consistent throughout the coverage. From these, four propositions about the newspapers' portrayal of teachers were generated. These were: teachers are leaving, teachers are underpaid, teachers have a difficult and stressful job, and teachers are low achievers. These are outlined below and various examples from the news coverage are provided. Each proposition is also examined in terms of the relevant literature and contextual information to ascertain whether the reporting conveyed an accurate and balanced portrayal of teachers and their situation.

### Teachers are leaving

The dominant message to emerge from the coverage in all four newspapers was that teachers were leaving, or planning to leave, the profession. This was presented as the reason for the teacher shortage, as opposed to other factors such as insufficient university enrolments in teacher education courses in the years preceding the shortage. The coverage indicated that it was not only older teachers who were due to retire who were leaving their positions. Much of the reporting focused on early-career teachers who had resigned or planned to do so. In 2005, for example, *The Age* reported that about one quarter of teachers quit the profession within the first five years of working in schools (Milburn, 2005, p. 3) and later, in 2007, that there had been "scores of resignations" from new teachers in the past 12 months (Hogan & Milburn, 2007, p. 20). Similar reports appeared in *The West Australian*, including one that quoted the State School Teachers' Union of WA

secretary predicting a “massive exodus” from teaching within the next few months (Strutt, 2007b, p. 6), and another that claimed 22 per cent of graduate teachers had left the state education system in 2006 after lasting just one year (Strutt, 2007a, p. 5). A later article that said 700 teachers had left state schools in 2007 also provided an explanation from the State Opposition Education Spokesman Peter Collier who was quoted as saying: “Teachers have been beaten from pillar to post for the last six years with constant change... so people are leaving in droves” (Hiatt, 2008, p. 16).

Numerous reports in *The Australian* referred to the high numbers of teachers reyring or quitting. Education commentator and columnist Kevin Donnelly expressed concern about the situation, saying “researchers agree that about 30 per cent of beginning teachers leave the profession after four to five years” (Donnelly, 2008, p. 19). Coverage in *The Courier-Mail* conveyed a similar message. For example, an article from 2008 reported the results of a survey that found that two out of five new teachers in Queensland’s public schools believed they would be doing another job within a decade (Johnstone, 2008b, p. 68). Another article claimed principals were retiring from the school system at the rate of five a month (Johnstone, 2008a, p. 11). In only a few instances were teachers themselves quoted in the coverage that portrayed teachers as leaving the profession. Almost all of the quotes and information came from union officials, politicians, bureaucrats and academics.

Research on teacher attrition in Australia confirms that many teachers are at, or nearing, retirement age (Fetherston & Lummis, 2012), and that around 25 per cent of new teachers will resign from teaching within five years (Australian Primary Principals’ Association, 2006). However, teacher attrition is only one of a number of factors that can influence the complex issue of teacher demand and supply. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development a range of variables such as “economic policy, population, education funding, class size, teaching technology, organization of schools, education market mechanisms, partnerships and teacher training and certification” can affect the number of teachers produced and the number required (Santiago, 2002, p. 13). Such was the case in Australia during the teacher shortage of the 2000s. The lack of teachers at that time was influenced by a sharp decline in teacher student numbers during the 1990s, due in part to the recession of the early part of that decade which led to some substantial surpluses in graduate numbers. The shortage was also affected by changes in higher education policy that led to a dramatic reduction in the number of institutions offering teacher training, and was compounded by increased enrolments in schools (Preston, 2000). These factors were not explored in any depth in the coverage of teacher shortage in the Australian newspapers. Nor did the reportage examine why the majority of teachers remain in their teaching positions, or outline strategies to retain teachers, other than increasing pay.

### **Teachers are underpaid**

In reporting teacher shortage, the newspapers usually linked teacher dissatisfaction and attrition to low pay. Union representatives, who were frequently quoted, invariably named low pay as a factor, (see, for example Chilcott, 2009, p. 21) as did other key spokespeople quoted, including politicians and academics. An article in *The Age*, for example, quoted

economics researcher Anthony Stokes as saying teachers' salaries had been in decline for 20 years, and teachers were "so unhappy" with their pay that many had extra jobs as waiters, cleaners and tutors to top up their income (Milburn, 2006, p. 3). Another article, from *The Courier-Mail*, argued that better pay would entice more men into teaching (Livingstone, 2004, p. 33). *The West Australian* agreed teachers' concerns about pay were warranted. An editorial published in 2008 said pay was the "number one" issue for teachers and that their demands for higher pay were "legitimate" (*The West Australian*, 2008b, p. 20). Education commentator Kevin Donnelly concurred, saying teachers were "not well paid" in *The Australian* (Donnelly, 2008, p. 19). Despite these claims, pay did not seem to be such a significant issue for teachers themselves. In the few instances former teachers were interviewed about why they had left the profession, they rarely named pay as a factor in their decision. Instead they usually cited workloads as the main reason. Teachers seemed to recognise that they were not highly paid. For example, a teacher quoted in a feature article in *The Age* said: "I hate to say it but a lot of kids are driven by wanting to make a lot of money and you won't make a lot of money out of teaching" (Cook, 2004, p. 6), but they also seemed to be accept the pay situation.

After teachers in Western Australia and Victoria were awarded significant pay rises the coverage did acknowledge that the situation regarding teacher pay had improved. However, overall, the impression was that pay had not increased enough. None of the articles, across the four newspapers, made the claim that teacher salaries overall were high compared to other professions. And while, a number of articles referred to teacher pay claims, only a handful of stories across the coverage included statistics about teacher salaries.

While it is accurate to say that pay has been identified as significant issue for teachers in the past (Santiago, 2002; Stoel & Thant, 2002), it appears the situation has improved markedly in Australia since the peak of the teacher shortage in 2007-2008. By 2013, starting teachers in most states were earning between \$55,000-60,000 a year, making them among the highest paid graduates in Australia (Balasubramanian, 2014). According to the Australian Education Union, mid-level teachers are paid around \$70,000 a year and, since 2011, senior teachers in some states have earned more than \$100,000 a year. In consistently presenting teachers as underpaid relative to other professions and rarely publishing details of teacher salaries, the newspapers did not adequately reflect the pay situation for teachers during the latter part of the coverage.

### **Teachers have a difficult and stressful job**

Throughout the coverage teachers were presented as having a difficult and stressful job. This was conveyed through repeated references to abusive and challenging students, excessive workloads and high levels of stress and burnout among teachers. The extent of the student behaviour issue was highlighted in an article published in *The West Australian* that claimed teachers were "concerned about being sworn at, spat on or threatened by students and the expectation that they should accept that behaviour" (Hiatt, 2007, p. 6). A subsequent editorial argued that teachers were "increasingly burdened" by social problems, lack of support and a "worrying trend of assaults and abuse on school staff"

(*The West Australian*, 2008a, p. 20). Similar reports appeared in *The Courier-Mail*, including one which said that a union survey had found classroom behaviour was the most significant issue facing teachers (Johnstone, 2008b, p. 68). The publication of relevant statistics confirmed and reinforced the message. An article from *The Australian*, for example, said bad behaviour including "violent attacks" on teachers had led to 2000 students being suspended from Western Australian public schools in 2006 (MacDonald, 2007, p. 5).

Teachers were also struggling with heavy workloads, according to the coverage. A number of articles made the link between workloads and teacher attrition including one in *The West Australian* which reported that an Australian Education Union study had found almost half of new teachers in Western Australia planned to leave the profession within five years because of heavy workloads and badly behaved students (King, 2007, p. 9). Another survey, of 1650 teachers, was the subject of an article in *The Age* that claimed teachers were leaving due to "highly stressful, poor working conditions" (Milburn, 2011, p. 15). A high number of the quotes from teachers about working conditions were taken from survey responses rather than interviews, with a few exceptions, such as article from *The Age* that quoted two young teachers who had recently left the profession. "It is a job you can never leave and I had enough of the really long hours I worked," one explained. The other said: "I would get to work at 7 am and finish at 10 pm" (Hogan & Milburn, 2007, p. 20).

The newspapers' depiction of teachers as overworked and stressed is consistent with research on how teachers perceive their working environment. In recent years, teachers have reported that abusive students are a significant concern (Day, 2012; Troen & Boles, 2003), and that they struggle to deal with the demands of their job (Day, Stobart, Sammons & Kingston, 2006; Galton & MacBeath, 2008). However, teachers also consistently speak about the joy and satisfaction associated with teaching (Butt et al., 2012; Nunez, Michie & Konkol, 2015). According to Bullough (2008, pp. 20-21), who interviewed 40 teachers, although many complained about an increase in paperwork and pressures, nearly all of them said they "loved teaching and remained as committed to it as when they first started". Similar recent research (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015, p. 24) involving interviews with Australian teachers found that "personal fulfilment" was the main reason cited for why they chose to stay in their jobs, and that many participants said "they loved teaching, found the work stimulating and felt that they were personally suited to the role".

The sense that teachers appreciated their work did emerge in a few of the articles from the news coverage of teacher shortage. Almost of the reporting of this nature appeared in *The Age*, in articles in which individual teachers were quoted. One such article, published in the early part of the coverage, in 2004, quoted a new teacher as saying: "I'm having an absolute ball. I couldn't think of anything better to be spending my time doing" (Russell, 2004, p. 6). Another example, from the latter part of the coverage, in 2012, included a lengthy interview with a man who had maintained his enthusiasm for teaching over a 40-year career. "Teaching has changed quite a bit over that long period of time but the one great constant is the students," he was quoted as saying. "They never cease to amaze or



challenge me” (Kellahan, 2012, p. 8). The true nature of teaching was probably best expressed in a comment piece written by a former teacher. “Teaching at its best is an exhilarating experience. Those moments when a child suddenly comes to a new understanding and expresses his or her delight, or when students surf a wave of excitement as they experience something fresh and wonderful” he wrote. This, however, was followed by: “Working in schools can be frustrating, exhausting and, at its worst, physically dangerous” (Campbell, 2009, p. 23). Overall, negative comments dominated the reporting, while coverage that conveyed the sense that teachers enjoyed their work was rare.

### **Teachers are low achievers**

In the coverage of teacher shortage, teachers were also often portrayed as low achievers. This message was evident from the beginning of the time period analysed, with *The Age* reporting in 2004 that students with relatively low academic scores were being accepted into teaching (Milburn, 2004, p. 3), and it became more strident as the reporting continued. By 2008 *The Australian* was arguing in an editorial that it was “unacceptable that in recent years teaching courses have consistently admitted large numbers of school leavers from the bottom half of the results spectrum to what is one of the most important professions” (*The Australian*, 2008, p. 13). A later feature article claimed that entry marks for education had “nose-dived” (Hare, 2012, p. 25). Teacher quality was “highly variable” (Buckingham, 2005, p. 16), according to *The Courier-Mail*, while an editorial in *The Age* said teaching as a profession was undervalued and that there was a need to lift the standards of teaching graduates (*The Age*, 2010, p. 14). The claim that teachers were low achievers was generally not supported by quotes from sources but presented as fact by reporters in news and feature stories and by editors in editorials. This may be in part due to the previously mentioned focus, by successive federal governments, on improving teacher quality. Other research has found teachers are often portrayed in the news as to blame for a perceived decline in educational standards (Cohen, 2010; Shine, 2015; Shine & O’Donoghue, 2013) and further, that coverage in *The Australian* newspaper in particular has frequently presented the views of politicians and commentators who have questioned teacher quality (Thomas, 2009; Hattam, Prosser & Brady, 2009).

Numerous researchers (Down, 2012; O’Donoghue & Clark, 2010; Zimmerman & Dibenedetto, 2008) have questioned the validity of government claims relating to teaching standards and have argued that the discourse around teacher quality allows governments to shift the blame for a perceived decline in educational standards from policy makers to teachers themselves. A decline in teacher quality is difficult to prove and the evidence for such an argument is not strong. The reporting of teacher shortage suggested that low entrance scores for university teaching courses had compromised the quality of graduates but the coverage did not provide any information to support that claim. The message that high numbers of students with low ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) scores are entering teaching has continued to be a strong focus of more recent reporting, and was recently investigated by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group. In reporting its findings the group queried the relevance of such an argument, given that school leavers with a known ATAR comprised just 19.5 per of the total domestic

undergraduate commencements in teacher education in 2012 (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2015, p. 11).

## **Discussion**

The news media is said to play a “uniquely important role in shaping public opinion about teachers” (Warburton & Saunders, 1996) and negative news coverage of educational issues is known to concern teachers and even affect their enthusiasm for their work (Liu & Tsao, 2013). This, and other studies (Hargreaves et al., 2007; Shine & O'Donoghue, 2013) suggest that teacher concerns about a focus on negative reporting of education may be warranted. Although the coverage analysed here was not strongly critical of teachers, aside from the message that teachers were low achievers, it consistently presented an unfavourable image of teaching as a job. This has implications not only for how the general public perceives the teaching profession but also for teachers, and prospective teachers. In focusing on claims of low pay, stress and abusive students, news media coverage may discourage people from entering the teaching workforce or prompt existing teachers to leave. Repeated references to the low status afforded to teachers and the questionable standards of teacher graduates may also deter prospective students from entering university teacher preparation programs and possibly contribute to the high attrition rate in the teaching workforce.

While there is evidence to support the dominant portrayals of teachers in the newspaper coverage as outlined here, the research literature and relevant contextual information reveal there is more to the story than what is being told. The complexity and nuances of teacher working conditions, job satisfaction, recruitment and retention were not recognised in the reporting of teacher shortage. Instead, the issue was politicised and the aim of balance in journalism ostensibly met through the inclusion of government and opposition sources or government and teacher union sources. Aside from the coverage in *The Age*, the reporting rarely included teacher or principal comments about the rewards and benefits of their job. As Day (2008) has pointed out, most teachers do adapt, survive and stay in the profession. The coverage rarely acknowledged that fact, nor did it attempt to explore why teachers stay.

It may be that the journalists who wrote the articles did try to address the complexities of the issues in their reporting of teacher shortage. The analysis here is confined to what was published, which can differ from what a reporter submits to their editor. For this reason, future related research should include interviews with journalists about their experiences of reporting on education. Additionally, efforts should be made to raise awareness among journalism students, journalists and editors of the tendency to negative and often simplistic reporting of education. Journalism education and newsroom initiatives could also point to the reliance on certain official spokespeople in education, such as politicians and union representatives, and suggest alternative people and groups to approach for interviews. There also needs to be greater recognition among journalists, journalism educators and teacher organisations of the impact of education news media coverage on teachers.

Research has shown teachers themselves are rarely quoted in news coverage (Cohen, 2010; Thomas, 2006). Such was the case in this study. Union officials were generally quoted on behalf of teachers. Given the very high level of union membership among Australian public sector teachers this may be considered appropriate. However, in consistently emphasising the difficult aspects of teaching and arguing for higher pay, union representatives may be contributing to negative perceptions about teaching as a job. This point has been raised in other Australian research that has questioned the value of union contributions to news media coverage about teachers (Keogh & Garrick, 2011; Shine & O'Donoghue, 2013). As journalists will attest, it can be difficult to secure interviews with schoolteachers and principals in Australia because they are generally not able to speak to the media without express permission from their employer. However, as the coverage from *The Age* shows, it is possible to include teacher perspectives. This study argues that union officials should not replace, but rather complement, teacher voices in the news. The nature of the coverage may be quite different if comments from teachers and principals were the norm, rather than the exception.

## Conclusion

This paper has considered the portrayal of teachers in the reporting of a major and ongoing issue in education. The analysis points to a negative focus in coverage and indicates that the complexities and nuances surrounding the nature of teaching as a job and teachers' own attitudes to their work are generally being overlooked. As research of this type is rare, this paper is intended to provide a starting point for further related studies. Such research could examine the reporting of other educational issues to ascertain whether the tendency to negative and superficial reporting is widespread. It would also be valuable to consider the reporting of teacher shortage in radio and television news, and in alternative online news sources. The focus of this study is on traditional mainstream newspapers because they tend to set the news agenda, despite dwindling circulation figures. However, there are a growing number of other online news sources now available to Australians including *The Conversation*, *New Matilda* and *The Guardian* that are also deserving of attention. *The Guardian*, in particular, regularly reports on teachers and schooling in its dedicated Education section and may provide a quite different perspective on teacher shortage. Other related research could seek the views of teachers themselves to establish the effects of the reporting of teacher shortage. It may be that such reporting influenced the morale and motivation of certain teachers or, conversely, that news coverage about high demand for teachers encouraged some people to elect to study teaching.

There is also a need to consider in more detail the question of who is directing the news media debate on educational issues. This study suggests that official sources, such as politicians, government employees and union representatives are the dominant sources in education news, whereas key stakeholders such as teachers, students and parents are rarely being quoted. The repeated use of certain official spokespeople may be contributing to the negative tone of the coverage and influencing the nature of the coverage, and this needs to be further explored.

In the case of the coverage considered here the few positive statements about teaching were articulated by teachers themselves. Almost all of these were published in *The Age*. This and other research (Cohen, 2010; Nunez, Michie & Konkol, 2015; Thomas, 2011) argues that teachers should have the opportunity to play a more active role in public debates about education. According to Ulmer, (2014, p.10) efforts to expand "individual teacher voice within public discourse" may counter negative presentations in the news media. As previously stated, various bureaucratic measures can hamper journalist and teacher relations, but interviews with teachers and principals do occur and journalists should persist in their efforts to include teacher perspectives. It is also vital that education officials recognise the value in allowing teachers and principals to publicly promote the positive aspects of their job, and adopt a more cooperative, open and proactive approach to dealing with the news media.

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